

A World In Crisis: What Are Our Moral Obligations?

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) The topic before us is a world in crisis. I believe it needs neither explanation or elaboration, for the world has always been in some kind of crisis. Since Adam and Eve, who had their problems, (laughter) and their children, who had theirs, whatever happened in the world then, actually is almost always reverberating in what is happening now. Civil wars, jealousy, fear, anguish, hunger, world crisis. [00:01:00] The question, of course, is are we also witnessing a moral disaster? I think the answer may be -- well, wait, we'll come to it later.

One thing is clear, what we do witness is political instability in various far away countries, dangerous explosions of suicide killers old and new, financial upheavals everywhere. Open any publication, listen to any news program, or radio, or television, and you will inevitably conclude that history itself is going through amazing and disturbing upheavals and social convulsions. What could be, what is the cause of such crises? [00:02:00] Is it the economy alone? It surely constitutes one of its major components, but there are others. The general sense of insecurity of society which feels less and less secure.

And still racism in some places, and still fanaticism in others, and still violence in so many places under the sun. Is it a consequence of quasi universal distrust? Distrust in financial dealers, distrust in military decisions, distrust in religious leaders? Politically distrust, not always justified, may be the reason for such a degree of abstentions [00:03:00] at elections. Too many voters in too many lands have less and less confidence in their candidates.

Language itself is in crisis. Provoked, used, and abused in so many ways. Look what is happening to vocabulary. Once upon a time, you spoke about "revolutions;" now you simply call "destabilization." If you say about a government, you don't say a government is lying, many of them do, you simply call their work disinformation. But everything else is like that. You open any newspaper with the list of best sellers. You read in that list a book on cooking and the other [00:04:00] on diet. (laughter) How do you combine that? Once upon a time, in the Soviet Union, one wrote books and went to jail. Here you go to jail and then you write books. (laughter)

So, where are we really? This generation when students need knowledge and need our passion for knowledge. What do we do when we must tell them, that in certain capitals Nazis parade in

the street? In Hungary the pro-Nazi party has won third place in recent elections. Holocaust deniers continue their nefarious propaganda and I am their target. Here and there one hears [00:05:00] something that shocks me. Believe me, I am not involved in politics, but I hear some radio broadcasters calling our president, democratically elected, Hitler. I really want to protest. There are limits, there must be. Which therefore leads us to our topic tonight. A world in crisis, what are our moral obligations? I shall approach these questions not from a political viewpoint, as I said, I am not involved in politics. That is neither my field nor my work. My passion is learning and I try to share it with my students and my readers, sometimes they are the same.

I chose to express my passion as a Jew [00:06:00] who believes that whatever our tradition has offered the surrounding world thus have universal applications and implications. Erasmus and Montaigne, I love them, because both of them celebrate our right to doubt. Always doubt. Baudelaire, the great poet, actually said that the Bill of Rights should include the right to contradict oneself. Oh, that is good to know and good to learn. We are going to learn tonight, as we have done here for forty-four years. Now why learning? Because I believe that what can bring people together, irrespective of [00:07:00] religious

affiliation or cultural passions, is that learning, we can learn together. And tonight we will.

Learning is what determined the fate of the Jewish people. Moses is not called our leader, although he was. He's not called our commander in chief, although he was. The first commander in chief of the first liberation army in history. We called him Moshe Rabbeinu, our teacher Moses. Teacher is an honor, and he has deserved that honor. Later on, the question will be, we'll try to face it, how did our people, the Jewish people, I speak as a Jew, cope with crisis. When the crisis occurred, did the Jew become a better Jew or on the contrary, [00:08:00] did he give up his Jewishness thinking that that would solve his personal part of the crisis? And when we speak, of course, about moral obligations, what is morality? It will come to that. Can a moral person do something immoral and still remain moral? Can an immoral person do something moral? Can an immoral person produce something good? Can, let's say, a great criminal also do something at one point in his or in her life that would benefit society? We had this question at one point because there were tests, medical tests, criminal tests made by physicians, by doctors, in the concentration camps. And one day I was approached by some people who were involved in all that, pharmaceutical company, saying look, what should we do. Some of

these tests brought [00:09:00] important results that could save lives. Should we use them? And they asked it almost in legal terms, what does one do in court with the fruit of a poisoned tree?

Well, these are the questions. ___ we know also that words, like human beings, have their own destiny. Some flourish, others die in a day, or a year, thrown in the wastebasket of history, or placed in a secret drawer of memory, perhaps to be resurrected or enriched. Some define an ideological movement, a social or military aspiration, or an era. It is something all of us need and lack, and in normal times, so easy to forget. [00:10:00] What are today's key words that no one, young or old, Jew or Gentile, can avoid simply by watching television or reading newspapers? Is it politics, healthcare, elections, science, technology, computers? All of these occupy the minds of leaders and voters alike, students and teachers alike, especially during campaigns or during class sessions, which means all the time. After all, isn't it so hard to miss two words to be heard, to be explored, to be shared, and that is morality and ethics. [00:11:00] We speak about prophets, we speak about dangers, we speak about news items that happened all over the world, and we forgot always the moral component. We don't ask ourselves is it moral what we do, what others do.

So, what is the difference between morality and ethics? The first belongs to behaviorism. The second to philosophical concepts and ideas. In my school, the Sorbonne, ethics is part of metaphysical studies, just as morality is part of sociology. In other words, ethics is the domain of the individual, just as morality is of society. Does it mean that they are forever in a situation of conflict? I prefer to believe that one [00:12:00] completes the other. In the Hebrew tradition there are three words that define justice. One is *chok*, which is a kind of divine law, immutable. Don't touch it, it's there. The other one is *mishpat*, which actually is already the interpretation of that law. And then comes *tzedek*, which is justice, which is individual. Justice, justice, you must pursue, justice which means every human being must pursue justice and define himself or herself by what is just that he or she does or wants to do.

Of course, speaking of morality, you will ask what about God in all that? Well, eventually one may state that the love of God belongs to ethics, whereas the fear of God [00:13:00] is part of morality. Both eminently figure in scripture. Thou shall love God, your God, with all your heart, all your soul, and all your very being, is one of the great biblical commandments transmitted from generation to generation, from family to

family, from school to teacher, from teacher to student. But there are more in fact, there are 612 more commandments, but they all have to do with human relations. Ours is a generation obsessed with an infinite quest for total knowledge. Never has science made such progress in such a short time. We go into space and explore the astrophysical dimensions, we walk on the moon, in medicine stunning wonders and miracles are being [00:14:00] performed with gratifying results. Thanks to the MRI and other instruments the human body has never been shown in such clarity. A hundred volumes, I am told, are lodged in one small iPhone. My God. You carry in the palm of your hand the entire body of the Talmud and the Bible and all the others for thousands of books. I wish my mind would become an iPhone.

(laughter)

Instant communication made human contact immediate. No more telegrams are needed for friends, lovers, or parents to be in touch with each other. Never have people talked so much, especially with the advent of Blackberrys. A friend of mine said that actually the whole problem is due to the one person who invented instant coffee. (laughter) [00:15:00] Because of that you have today instant knowledge, instant mysticism, instant prophet, everything is instant. My God, how can one live like that? When I was young, and there are some young

people here tonight, when I was your age, believe me, it took me weeks before I dared to look at a girl. More weeks to think of her. And to touch her. Kissing was equivalent to marriage. (laughter) And today you do all that in one hour. (laughter)

Well, this generation of ours that lived through the most luminous, but also the darkest events in recorded history, this generation, which is mine, we are still here. Are we aware of our privileged status? [00:16:00] The 20th Century will be remembered as the one that produced Auschwitz, but also the one that performed heart transplants. And for us Jews, five years separated the heroic insurrection of the Warsaw Ghetto from the declaration of the birth of the Jewish State. What does it mean for us to live, to be alive? What does it mean for us to witness new threats and perils hanging over the state of Israel, but also over the entire world? Haven't we learned that whatever happens to one group, one nation, one collective unit, affects all of them? That those who are the enemies of one nation, one religion, one group, are the enemies of all of us? Don't we know that? [00:17:00]

We'll talk about the suicide murderers. I believe their threat is the most serious. This is a new fanatic phenomenon where the killers are not afraid of punishment because they want to die.

They want to die in order to kill more. And just imagine, just imagine as the president of the United States, Obama, said two days ago in Washington at the summit meeting on nuclear issues, is it really unimaginable to think that one day eight terrorists will get hold of a very small miniature nuclear bomb. So, what do we say? We say that they must learn. And this is what we'll do tonight. And we shall continue [00:18:00] as soon as those who are impatiently waiting outside to come and take their seats.

To study is to give memory a voice. Is the past unavoidably irrevocably richer than the present? Is the past longer than the future? Were the centuries of Pythagor or Cicero, Dante, or the great scholars and mystics happier and wiser than ours? And the answer is clear, just as we cannot compare human beings but every human being is alone, and the only one, always one irreplaceable, one human being is the world, as is the other. [00:19:00] So, we cannot compare eras either.

Still one wonders, where is the Dostoevsky of today, and the Kafka, and the Rilke, and the Rembrandt? What we say about the place of ethics in our society applies therefore also to culture in general. And it could be raised with regard to previous generations. Have yesterday's students been luckier and their

teachers more blessed than they are now? It is said that when he grew old, the chief editor of the famous British magazine *Punch* remarked, "Oh," he said, "Punch isn't what it used to be." He stopped and continued, "Actually, it never was." Oh, isn't that true of everything that happens to societies and people? [00:20:00] But all depends on how we respond to the present. It lacks joy and trust. What about Darfur? What about the terror activities of Hezbollah, and Hamas, and Al Qaida? What about the civil wars in so many places? What about the wars in Afghanistan? What about the starvation of children? What about the misery so far away from our eyes? And in certain cases so near?

When it comes to morality we regretfully lag behind. I don't wish, of course, to discourage you, but I must confess to you that the situation today is not one that justifies happiness. When they ask me, when students ask me what [00:21:00] we can do about it, of course I say, "Learn, always learn." What we Jews have done with our catastrophes is we have turned their tale into a matter of learning. What were the catastrophes? Let's say the floods, actually the first, the first so to speak Holocaust because it destroyed everybody except Noah, who I don't like. (laughter) Because he was so selfish and so passive. God told him, "Build an ark." He built an ark. God

had to give him the measurements even, he wasn't a builder. God said, "Bring the animals." He brought all the animals by pair and everything. Then God said, "Leave the ark." [00:22:00] He left the ark. When they left the ark, what did he do? First of all he brought a sacrifice to God, but then he got drunk. Really to live through such an event and get drunk?

But what brought about the floods? The Bible tells us society became corrupt, violent, every person was an enemy to the other, and God said, it's enough. Well, God didn't like it, so he threw away the draft and wrote another one. Then we had the golden calf, which was a moral disaster. Moral. They had just left Egypt, God had made so many miracles, and because Moses was in heaven receiving the law [00:23:00] and he was late a few hours, they built an ark. And who was the leader? His brother. Really. What kind of people were they that they were punished? Then, if that wasn't enough, the destruction of the temple, the first, the second, and each time it was always because of people who became inhuman to one another. They lacked a social and ethical fiber. So, what is morality? Whose definition governs our conduct? On one essential level, morality implies limits, limits to interest, to profit, to instinct, to aspirations, to projects, to the pursuit of what is the core of human endeavors,

essential fulfillment and individual accomplishment. What are the limits? [00:24:00]

An important question, of course, is what are the limits to our freedom? Are there limits, must there be limits? But our hope, for like money and love, morality is flexible. It depends what you do with it. After all, we know a moral person almost by definition is someone who in the eyes of God and man rejects evil and does good. But who decides, who has the authority and power to decide what is good and what is not? In ancient times there were many gods. For the ancient people, there was a god of good and one god of evil, so therefore it's simple, what was bad comes from the god of evil. But we believe in one God, what does God say to someone who does what he [00:25:00] or she shouldn't do? One could say that a moral person is moral because he or she is concerned with the other and that is, I believe the real definition. To be moral means to seek not what is good for myself, but what is good for someone else who happens to walk alongside me, or to be my neighbor, or do something that I know that he enjoys, or help someone be less lonely, less desperate.

It is incumbent on the moral person to recognize and respect the sovereignty of all human beings. Freedom when it is not shared

is a priori doomed. I am not free because others are not, I am free only when others are. As long as there is one person who is not free, my freedom is curtailed. My freedom is conditioned [00:26:00] by yours, by theirs. But that is true of so many other attributes of humanity. I believe that respect is what determines our society or our society's goals. I almost said tolerance because I fight intolerance. But I don't like the word tolerance. I think already in the 19th Century Voltaire was among those who disliked it too. Because tolerance is condescending. Who am I to tolerate your views? I must respect your views. You have the same right to have your views as I have to have mine. And who knows, maybe yours are better, wordier.

Of course to be moral means to be concerned with one's community, one's family, one's people, absolutely. It's normal [00:27:00] that I should feel closer to those who are my brothers. But it should not be exclusive. Morality means to help those who need help, and therefore you are responsible for that help. Oh yes, you can say that morality has to do with good and evil, and theoretically they're constantly in conflict, the one negates the other. But it is not so. It goes beyond it. Because it has to do with the law, first of all. The law, where most civilization is ruled by law. But what do you do

when the law is unlawful? Look, remember, in our country, our blessed country, [00:28:00] and I as the refugee you came to America, we always, Marion and I, speak about it, we came here from Europe, and we appreciate the American blessings more than American born people because we have seen the difference.

And I tell you when I came to America and I saw racism at work in the South, worse, it was the law, the law of the land was racist, was unlawful, was immoral, to punish a community because of the color of the skin. And I have said it, I must repeat it, then for the first time in my life I felt shame. I never felt shame as a Jew, but then I felt shame for being white. And then we went to South Africa because of Apartheid to see what was happening, and there again, I felt shame. [00:29:00] But progress was made. It took the life of the president, of his brother, Martin Luther King, for the law to change, thank god. And therefore, I want you to know, the day when we were in Washington, my wife and I, to the inauguration for the first black president, we felt so proud. Proud of America for having done that. But at the same time we know the law can be unlawful.

Nazism obeyed its own laws. It was the law of the land to humiliate Jews in the street, to imprison them, to deprive them

of their right to joy, to live, and even to die [00:30:00]
because they decided how that person should die. It was the
law. Take communism, the communist law was the same. Twenty
million Russians were killed during the Second World War,
but before that already, a few million died in the Gulags. By
law. What is needed? That the law should be just and therefore
moral. The morality of the law is as important as the law
itself. But who decides? There's a marvelous play called *The
Dybbuk* one of the great plays in the World Theatre, a Yiddish
play. It's about a *dybbuk* who entered the body of the bride
because, because, and because [00:31:00] and the exorcism, the
scene how the rabbi exorcised, it was marvelous. At one point a
messenger, the mystical messenger, said to the rich father of
the bride, "Come, look into the street." They went to the
window and he said, "What do you see through the window?" He
said, "People in the street running." Then he said, "Cover the
window with silver or with gold." And then he said, "What do
you see now?" He said, "I see myself." Because of silver and
gold, that man forgot that other people exist in God's world.
And that's immoral. To ignore other peoples' destiny [00:32:00]
is immoral.

Because one is not born moral. One can become moral or immoral.
When we think, of course, of what people can do to one another

we know that they can do unimaginable, frightful, terrorizing things. They could become enemies to one another, but it could also, at the same time, do something noble, and lift up a person or a group to greater heights. So, the question is, of course, what must be done for a society or an individual to choose morality, a moral life in times of crisis [00:33:00] especially? What we have done in our history, that whenever a great tragedy occurs, we never gave in to its laws. But we did, we used that tragedy for more learning. After the destruction of the temple, the Talmudic universe opened its gates. During pogroms or after pogroms, the Hassidic movement began. There was always a door open, there was always a palm open, there was always a heart open to new adventures, new promises, and new gestures of humanity. In Hebrew, the word moral, morality, is *musar*, it comes from the word *limsor*, to communicate, to hand over, [00:34:00] which means morality is never, is never a solitary act. A saint who is alone cannot be moral because he is concerned only with himself and with God, but not with the others, not with God's other creatures.

Albert Camus in one of his novels asked the question, can there be a saint without God? And I said, can there be a saint without other people? The answer is no. It is only what one does for someone else that his or her morality is ascertained.

I wrote once a novel called *The Town Beyond the Wall*. I recommended it to a few students who were here before. It was one of my early novels. [00:35:00] In the end of that novel I describe my protagonist, my main protagonist Michael in jail, in a cell, and the communist tormenters put him in a cell together with a young madman knowing if nothing happens, the madness of the young person will contaminate the mind of my hero. And therefore Michael found the only way out. He began curing the mad boy in order to save his own sanity. Alone he would have lost his mind. And so, what is the most beautiful part in our scripture, which we all read, which of course defines morality? [00:36:00] It is the commandment which says, "Thou shall not stand idly by." "Thou shall not stand idly by." In other words, never be indifferent when other people suffer of solitude, or of pain, or of persecution.

Now comes, of course, the definition, who is the other? If I'm responsible for the other person's life, who is that other? You could say the other is a stranger, but not so, because the stranger has three categories, the other has none. [00:37:00] The other is the other is the other. In our -- in the Bible we have three notions of the stranger. One is the *ger*, the other one is the *nokhri*, the third one is the *zar*. The *ger* is actually a convert, and we celebrate that convert. A person who

converts to the Jewish faith, never under duress, the Jewish religion has never, one small exception, short exception, never proselytized. On the contrary, they make it very difficult for people to convert. We say come, stay where you are, you are as important, as good, as holy as a Christian or a Buddhist as we are as Jews. You don't have to be Jewish to be happy. Or unhappy. (laughter) But once that person converts, everything is given to that person. They are even given a past, he has our past, he inherited my past. [00:38:00] And on Passover we say, *Avadim Hayinu*, we were slaves in Egypt, he says the same thing, he said my parents were slaves in Egypt. He has all the prerogatives and more than the Levites.

Then comes *nokhri*, who is a simply a stranger, who is a nice stranger, who lives in our midst, and never does anything bad to us, never plans anything hostile. He's perfect. And also we give him lots of human rights, you would say today. And then comes the third one who is called *zar*. And *zar*, for reasons that you will understand, the punishment almost, the situation of the *zar* is terrible. The *zar* has no right to -- he has no right to serve the Passover, cannot come to the -- close to the sanctuary, terrible what we do to the *zar*. The interesting part is [00:39:00] the *ger* is a foreigner, so is the *nokhri*, the second, the *zar* is a Jew. Which means, when a Jew becomes the

stranger to his people, then the people, I think, behave almost cruelly to that person because he estranged himself from the community to join who knows what other force.

But on the other hand, the other is the other. The Jew has its own obligations naturally. The obligation of charity, for instance. You know, we Jews have so many prayers, so many blessings, you cannot even count them there are so many. A blessing for the rain, a blessing for the rainbow, a blessing for bread, a blessing for fruit, a blessing for wine, a blessing for water. [00:40:00] Before doing that you must recite a benediction. There's only one commandment which has no blessing for, it's *tzedakah*, just charity. If you want to give charity to the poor there is no blessing for it, because, first of all, while you will recite your benediction you will be in such ecstasy that the poor guy will die of hunger. (laughter) So, don't give me any blessings, give him the money that he needs, help him. So, it is very special.

The second is against humiliation. You have no idea how we treat humiliation in the Jewish religion. It is a sin equivalent to murder. To humiliate another human being for whatever he or she is, is like committing murder because [00:41:00] you humiliate the image of God in that person, you

humiliate what is noble, what could be noble, in that person's life. A moving illustration of that is in the Talmud. A great example. There's always a discussion there between the disciples of Shammai, the great sage who was known for his rigor, and the disciples of Hillel, who was more moderate, kinder. They brought a very simple question, we are supposed, by law, when we come to a wedding to praise the girl, the bride, for her beauty, for her grace, for enchanting, everything, says, is the question, and what if, God forbid, she isn't? She's not beautiful, she's not gracious, [00:42:00] what do we do there? Should we lie? Shammai and his disciples say, yes, tell the truth, truth comes before everything else. Hillel says, come on, really? Truth is an abstraction. Here we deal with the poor girl, it's the happiest day of her life, am I going to destroy that happiness? Lie, come on. Don't humiliate her. It's always like that.

At the same time we are told marvelously well that the disciples of Shammai and Hillel were so respectful towards one another in spite of the fact that except for eighteen cases, they always disagreed on anything. But they intermarried, they married their daughters and their sons, and they ate at each other's table. Respect [00:43:00] for the other. Who is the other? A stranger? More than that. An enemy? Why does he or she

inspire suspicion and fear? Do they implacably become a source of frustration, uncertainty, and danger, instead of creative curiosity and solidarity? At what point does the other cease to be a stranger? God is God, and God is always present, and God is not the other. Who is the other? Satan. But these are not necessarily solely socioeconomic and psychosocial questions. These questions also belong to the domain of ethical conduct, for they oblige me to explore all the possibilities [00:44:00] available to me when facing the other.

They also include the option of reconciliation and cooperation. Jews in 2000 years of exile suffered in a variety of ways for a multitude of pretext, embodying all the imaginable paradoxes. They were hated for being too rich or too poor, too learned or too ignorant, too particular or too universal. In general we were persecuted not simply because we insisted on remaining separate and different but also -- or mainly because often for religious reasons the Jew was forever considered to be the other. And these endeavors of persecution culminated in anti-Semitism, which itself culminated in the Holocaust. It's clear, anti-Semitism is not the only [00:45:00] element that produced the Holocaust, but without it there would have been no Holocaust. It seemed as if Jews were condemned to belong to a different species and dwell on another planet. In ghettos

first, then in sealed cattle cars, and later in gas chambers. But then again we ask, who is the other to us? A racist, does the other hate me, is the hater always the other, who is the other in me?

The Talmudic literature has one sage who was called Acher, The Other, Elisha, son of Abuyah. And many, many years ago here at this very place we evoked his destiny. Was the term [00:46:00] used because of his rebellion against divine injustice?

Perhaps. But at that time I said, if that was the reason, I would have said that he was a victim of injustice because I liked his rebellion. But I prefer to think that it had to do with his joining the Roman camp against his former colleagues. He became an informer and responsible for the death of many other Talmudic sages. And that's why he was The Other. The great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name was actually right, perhaps, when he declared that the other is our mirror, and that's why he frightens us. And he said, "When I look into that mirror, it is myself [00:47:00] that I see. And if I see evil in the other, actually it is mine that I may discover." Well, is it true? I am not so sure. To me, in a moral society, the other is not my enemy, but my potential ally and companion. My humanity, therefore, is given the privilege of helping his. I can learn from the other because the other is

not like me. There remains something ineffable in every human being.

Marcus Aurelius's brother Antonius Pius was Rabbi Yehudah's friend. Were they each other's other? No, they were fellow students and teachers. It is the otherness of the other [00:48:00] that attracts me to him or her. I want to learn from them. Where do they come from, carrying what memories, nourishing what aspirations, and articulating or repressing what kind of hopes for whom? I want to know and penetrate the secret universe that inhabits the other. I want to know how to decipher its signals, how to disarm its threats, how to walk together towards the sun, how to make a wanderer smile, a beggar sing, a despairing patient dream. I want to learn with the other and sometimes from the other how to ensure the happiness of a hungry child and hungry parents. That's what I expect to do for and with the other. So, what have we done? What we have done [00:49:00] at least we Jews of my generation and our friends, non-Jews, what we have done is we have tried to redeem ourselves through the help that we gave to those who are not ourselves. We believe that our ideals must be shared, otherwise they are sterile, and therefore we are so much concerned with the fate of the world, if the world were to allow the suicide killers to

continue their nefarious work, it began as always in Israel.
Only in Israel.

At that time they would attack buses and kill children, and parents, and grandparents. Once they killed three generations in one attack. [00:50:00] And Marion and I were there when that happened. Three generations. Then it moved to London, to Madrid, to Casablanca, to Thailand, and lately to Moscow. Recently we realized that some of these suicide killers are young girls. My God, how can we stop them? We must stop them. Not only for the sake of Israel itself, but for the sake of the whole world. Now, what about Israel, and what about morality, the morality of Israel? What should our collective or individual attitude be towards Israel in the name of what we believe to be Jewish moral values? Question, with all that has been going on on her borders, specifically around Gaza lately, [00:51:00] is Israel still a moral state? We must ask this question. Is Israel's concept of morality ours? And to reach a possible, if not plausible, evaluation of the situation there, let us phrase the question differently, are Israel's goals moral, ethical, generous? And I believe the answer is yes. The goals are, even though sometimes under objective conditions, the methods used do inflict frustration and suffering on Palestinians, and they hurt. What could Israel do when 30,000

rockets fell on Ashkelon and the North in so many places?
Obliging children leaving their classrooms in less than two
minutes [00:52:00] to go and hide in shelters.

Is everything in Israel's national conduct absolutely ethical?
There is no absolute, it cannot be. Nor can any other democracy
great or small be absolutely moral. Are we moral, we Americans,
what we do now in Afghanistan? How many civilians are being
killed? It's reported in the media. Do we hear protests?
Condemnations? Few experts would dare to contest Israel's
adherence to the rule of law. Her judiciary is above reproach.
Whenever somebody kills and it's not part of a military
operation where it's an accident, we immediately a commission of
inquiry [00:53:00] is established, totally sovereign, and often
directed against the government. Still what makes Israel
different is that her goals have a name, it is survival in
history. Israel is the only state on the planet earth whose
very existence is constantly threatened. Israel cannot afford
losing a war, it would be the last war. It could and would mean
the end, not of an episode, but of a dream. That has been the
reality since 1948, and it still is. Let's not forget, Israel
is surrounded by Hezbollah in the north and Hamas in the south.
The charter of both includes the destruction of the Jewish
state. It hasn't changed, it hasn't been removed.

The eighth paragraph of the charter of Hamas [00:54:00] is a quotation from the Koran, but it doesn't speak about Israel, it simply says, "Go and kill to the last Jew. The last Jew must be killed." That is the charter of Hamas. Israel's objectives since '48 have never been to oppress Palestinians. Any student of contemporary Middle East history will admit that whenever any government in Jerusalem chose a military option, the army commanders were going out of their way to avoid civilian casualties, and surely avoid killing of children. In an open letter to a young Palestinian written and published in the late 70s I wrote, "The Jew I am with a past which is mine, I do feel what the refugee in you feels. I even understand your struggle for a [00:55:00] Palestinian state, although there was never a Palestinian state in history. But I feel it and I accept it. I remember what young Jews in Palestine felt before 1948. They too chose armed resistance, but none of the three undergrounds targeted civilians, let alone children. Remember, their heirs would never become suicide killers, nor would they hide behind children used as living shields in battle. Hence, I do not allow myself to be a judge over Israel. I owe Israel too much to become its prosecutor and even critic. Does it mean Israel should be above criticism? I didn't say that. I say that I cannot be a judge of Israel, for I have seen and endured enough

what was the result of Jewish weakness. [00:56:00] I must therefore support Jewish strength. Nevertheless, I cannot, and will not deny anyone the right to criticize any move by Israel, provided it is moderate, pained, and measured, and well-founded. Those who exaggerate come from the extreme right and left. Occasionally anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism become amazing bedfellows and occasionally they are the others.

Tomorrow in the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*, and Sunday in the *New York Times*, the following full page ad will be published. I quote, it was inevitable, Jerusalem once again is at the center of political debates and international storms. [00:57:00] New and old tensions surface at a disturbing pace. Seventeen times destroyed, and seventeen times rebuilt, it is still in the middle of diplomatic confrontations that could lead to armed conflict. Neither Athens nor Rome has around that many passions. For me, the Jew that I am, Jerusalem is above politics. It is mentioned more than 600 times in scripture and not a single time in the Koran. Its presence in Jewish history is overwhelming. There is no more moving prayer in Jewish history than the one expressing our yearning to return to Jerusalem. To many theologians it is Jewish history, to many poets a source of inspiration. It belongs to the Jewish people

and it's much more than a city. It is what binds one Jew to another in a way that remains hard to explain. When a Jew [00:58:00] visits Jerusalem for the first time, it is not the first time, it is a homecoming. The first song I heard was my mother's lullaby about and for Jerusalem. Its sadness and its joy are part of our collective memory. Since King David took Jerusalem as his capital, Jews have dwelled inside these walls with only two interruptions. When Roman invaders forbade them access to the city, and again when under Jordanian occupation, Jews, regardless of nationality, were refused entry into the Old Jewish Quarter to meditate and pray at the wall, the last vestige of Solomon's temple.

It is important to remember, had Jordan not joined Egypt and Syria in the war against Israel, the Old City in 1967, Jerusalem would still be Arab. Clearly while Jews were ready to die for Jerusalem [00:59:00] they would not kill for Jerusalem. Today, for the first time in history, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all may freely worship at their shrines. And contrary to certain media reports, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are allowed to build their homes anywhere in the city. The anguish over Jerusalem is not about real estate, but about memory. What is the solution? Pressure will not produce a solution. Is there a solution? There must be, there will be. But why tackle the

most complex and sensitive problem prematurely? Why not first take steps which will allow the Israeli and Palestinian communities to find ways to live together in an atmosphere of security? Why not leave the most difficult, the most sensitive issue, for such a time? Jerusalem must remain the world's Jewish spiritual capital, not a symbol of [01:00:00] anguish and bitterness, but a symbol of trust and hope. As the Hassidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said, "Everything in the world has a heart, the heart itself has its own heart, and Jerusalem is the heart of our heart, the soul of our soul."

Well, we come to the conclusion. Moral education is proper, moral education is a necessity, moral education is surely the major part of the answer. Sometimes it seems urgent, but now at the beginning of the 21st Century already filled with theological upheavals and plagued by existential perils, we know, we know [01:01:00] that only moral education can help society.

Naturally education and literature are kept alive and vibrant by language. To the German philosopher Leibnitz it's peoples' immortal monument. To the poet Hofmannsthal it's an immense kingdom of the dead, of an unfathomable depth. That is why we draw from language the highest level of life. And if I may add, the deepest level of meaning. Do we study Shakespeare because of his unique great art? Or also because of his insight in the

human psyche? Marc Bloch, one of the great philosophers of history in pre-war France said, "Historical facts are in their essence also psychological. At one point, all our intellectual or spiritual endeavors merge. Astrophysicists and mystics speak almost the same [01:02:00] language, music and mathematics go together, and politics and money too must undergo that test of moral education.

Learning about Galileo's death by the Inquisition, Descartes, the great philosopher, was so worried that he kept an important manuscript on philosophy unpublished. Who was the victim then? Justice? Yes. Knowledge? Yes. But also truth. The great poetess Anna Akhmatova said, "If you are afraid, don't write. If you write, don't be afraid. Whenever and wherever fear triumphs under dictatorship, truth is wounded and imprisoned." How did Augustine put it? "Let man learn from the Maccabees how to die for truth." But who's truth? The victims? [01:03:00] Isn't that of the killer also truth? His. But which appeals to us? God's. Can God's truth be the victim of man? Can God be the victim of man? Can man be God's prisoner or jailer? One thing is clear, it is clear, that what we say in literature which is our domain, rooted in ethos and logos, it surely is also known about ideas and experiences, but also about memory.

Memory, which includes the memory of memory. In studying -
Jeremiah and Euripides, Plato and Cicero we seek in the depth of
their words to create living links with those who lived hundreds
if not thousands of years ago. [01:04:00] Their challenges and
battles are reflected in our own. Hercules and Hamlet on some
mysterious level remain our contemporaries.

So, at the end of our journey tonight, what makes us moral?
Special circumstances? Hereditary concepts and ideals?
Instantaneous illuminations? Personal experiences or memories?
Moments of great happiness or profound pain? Some of all these
and something else? To the believer it is religious faith,
faith in the Almighty Creator and in his creation, faith in His
commandments. Follow them and you are assured of being moral.
And what do they say to you? They tell you that there are
neither accidents nor coincidences in life, all events are
linked, all encounters belong to a secret and perhaps eternal
design. [01:05:00] The believer says to himself or herself, I
don't know the answer to existential questions of human agony,
but He, God knows it, and that must be sufficient. Human
justice and divine compassion may not always be reconciled.
What about the non-believer? The secular? To him it is not
sufficient. He believes in a moral code invented, then
gradually developed by generations of thinkers of social

progress, poets of dawn and dusk, seekers of truth and beauty, dreamers of human victories over misfortune and suffering. What do they all have in common? Both wish to be ethical. Both favor deeds over intent. Concretely that means adopting an ethical attitude towards one's fellow human being, or simply even the other.

In scripture we find that immediately [01:06:00] after the Ten Commandments the law of slavery was offered. A slave has no right to remain a slave just as the owner has no right to own slaves. I must be free, but not free to give up my freedom. Of few things in life I am certain, and this is one of them, I am certain that only another person can move me to despair. I am also convinced that only another human being can save me from that despair. Ultimately hope, like peace, is not God's moral present to us, it is our ethical gift to one another, and that gift, my friends, is the most beautiful, the most moving, [01:07:00] the most inspiring, and the most rewarding of all. Thank you. (applause)

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